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ABSTRACT

Many administrators and educators have questioned the wisdom of establishing competitive goals for forensic programs. Many appear to believe that the acceptance of competitive goals necessarily leads to such abusive behavior as atheoretical teaching, the prioritizing of style over substance, the promotion of education shortcuts, and the abandonment of appropriate ethical codes. The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it examines the role of competition in forensics. Second, it contrasts the ego and mastery approaches to competitive behavior. Third, it suggests possible steps that can be taken to promote the acceptance and accomplishment of competitive goals by individual forensics programs. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/RS)

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So What's Wrong with a Little Competition?:

A Defense of Competitive Goals

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Abstract

Many administrators and educators have questioned the wisdom of establishing competitive goals for forensic programs. Many appear to believe that the acceptance of competitive goals necessarily leads to such abusive behavior as atheoretical teaching, the prioritizing of style over substance, the promotion of education shortcuts, and the abandonment of appropriate ethical codes. The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, the authors examine the role of competition in forensics. Second, they contrast the ego and mastery approaches to competitive behavior. Third, possible steps that can be taken to promote the acceptance and accomplishment of competitive goals by individual programs will are suggested.

So What's Wrong with a Little Competition?:

A Defense of Competitive Goals

> *There are people (speech communication majors not participating in debate and law school dropouts with debate experience) with a deep enough interest in the role of communication of ideas in our society to have gone as far in this area as they have. What turns them away from the forensic front lines? Are they afraid of the rough and tumble of vigorous competition? I think not. Rather I believe they are repulsed by the NATURE, NOT THE VIGOR, of that competition; by the way in which the development of skills in the games seems to have become and end in itself, rather than being seen as a part of the larger context for which society intended the game to be played (Franklyn Haimen, attributed).*
>
> *The ethical world is never given; it is forever in the making (Cassirer, 1944, p. 61).*

Although directing his comments to academic debate, Professor Haimen's remarks are likely to resonate with some in the ranks of the Individual Events community who believe that the acceptance of competitive goals in our activity necessarily leads to abusive behavior. These individuals might point to the current "style versus substance" debate (for example, see Kirch & Morgan, 1990; Kirch & Zeidler, 1998; & Lindemann & Zeidler, 1995) in order to suggest that the desire to win has shortchanged the pedagogical purpose of our activity; that learning to play the game has replaced an understanding of why the game is played. Other signs these individuals might direct our attention to include worries concerning the atheoretical teaching of events, the promotion of education shortcuts, and the abandonment of appropriate ethical codes. Indeed, in just the last three years, the governing bodies of both the AFA-NIET and the NFA National Individual Events Championships have had to take action against unfair competitive behavior. But still the

question remains: does the acceptance of competitive goals in our activity inherently invite abuse?

Although we believe that the potential for abuse is a part of any competitive activity, we also believe that (1) competition is a constitutive element of intercollegiate Individual Events, and that (2) it may be our approach to competition that needs to be rethought. Much as one might argue that learning to play the forensics game has replaced our understanding of why the game is played, so the desire for trophies and institutional recognition may sometimes be seen as replacing an appreciation of the benefits of a competitive laboratory. This is not due to competition per se, but rather by how competition is framed. Competition is not inherently good or bad. Rather, the way in which competition is organized and conducted is what produces either student empowerment or ethical abuse. We believe that those who would frame education and competition as a dichotomy (see Hamm, 1993) are egregiously mistaken. Competition in Individual Events should be educational. Valuing competition is not anti-pedagogical. Indeed, we agree with Bartanen (1994) who writes that, "competition is the engine driving the educational machine (p. 30). However, we may need to rethink how we approach the value of competition in our programs. The necessity for competitive goals should be encouraged so long as they produce health competitive cultures and encourage student development. As Cassirer (1944) notes above, "The ethical world is never given; it is forever in the making" (p. 61). As coaches and students it is up to us to encourage high standards of ethical behavior.

The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to examine the primary place of competition in Individual Events and to discuss ways in which the competitive impulse can

be framed so as to promote healthy and ethically superior behavior. We will accomplish this by (1) examining the role of competition in forensics; (2) contrasting the ego and mastery approaches to competition, and (3) suggesting possible steps that can be taken to promote the acceptance and accomplishment of competitive goals by individual programs.

The Role of Competition in Forensics

What does it mean for a student to be competitive? What does it mean for a student to be not competitive enough? We are not sure that there are consensual answers to these questions. However, competition is usually held in a negative light. Indeed, the role of competition and competitive goals in forensics is often denigrated by those who believe that competition inherently promotes abuse. We firmly believe, however, that to eliminate competition, or to place it in a secondary role, would be to do away with or unreasonably diminish a constitutive element of our activity. Indeed, the centrality of competition to forensics was articulated by the Report of the National Developmental Conference on Forensics, in 1975:

> Competition appears to provide motivation for people in American culture. In our society, the desire to be compared favorable with others has appeared to provide the impetus for creativity and rigor in the performance of tasks. The knowledge that contestants will have the products of their labors compared for the purpose of a judgment motivates them to do their best. When students observe that increased knowledge and improved skills result in greater success, competition provides the impetus for learning.

More recently, Bartanen (1994) in his text, Teaching and Directing Forensics, argues that "culture in the United States heavily rewards competitive behavior and competition is one defining characteristic of forensics in this country" (p. 30). This, of course, does not mean that the competitive impulse is always applauded or that its acceptance as a defining condition of our activity is unconditional. Hamm (1993) notes that the Second National

Developmental Conference on Forensics in 1990 "discussed the philosophical concern of the dual education/competitive aspects of Individual Events" and that this discussion "led to a higher awareness of the educational value while playing down the ever increasing competitive aspects of forensics" (p. 3). Obviously, the awareness Hamm refers to has now diminished.

The claims against "competitive goals" are many. For example, Hamm suggests that that "competition increases the likelihood of cheating and the use of prohibited competitive tools to ensure winning....introductions written by coaches, plagiarism, etc." (p. 15). Competition has also been accused of increasing students' felt level of anxiety and stress, producing confusion between goals and values, and of producing coaches who push too hard. Bartanen (1994) notes that some observers assert that "overemphasis on competition leads to an inevitable decline in ethical standards" (30). When students see winning an award or gaining a qualification as the end of the activity as opposed to the means of skill development, they may feel pressure to circumvent ethical practices. In addition, a focus on technical skill as opposed to forensic theory may foster problems. As Haimen argues:

> Our entire culture is geared, is it not, to tactic, strategy, and the arts of manipulation. Our greatest rewards, in both money and prestige, go to the professional technician, not the doctor of philosophy. We will probably be terribly good at getting to the moon, though no one is quite sure why we want to go there. So the average debater, lawyer, or politician, who is a creature of such a culture, can hardly be expected to bother with the "larger issues."

And although it is hard to argue that competition cannot foster all of these problems, it is also hard to argue that these are systemic abuses. In any event, the culprit Is not necessarily competition, but how individuals approach competition, how coaches approach

competition, and how the competitive impulse is defined and nurtured in individual forensic programs. The manner in which competition is approached is what determines whether it is healthy or not. As Bartanen argues, "the teacher has a important role in preventing misunderstanding of the proper place of awards" (p. 30). The discussion of "larger issues" needs to be part of the teaching of forensics.

Why Competition?

Not long after World War II when issues of expense and efficiency were not as relevant as they had been during the Depression and the War, many in forensics began to de-emphasize the competitive nature of the activity. For example, Miller (1954) argues that competition narrowed the scope of forensics programs to the tournament alone, lessened the variety of activities in which students engaged, narrowed the number of students used in the activity, and promoted poor public speaking. Not surprisingly, each of these charges finds a corollary in contemporary arguments against competition.

Rieke (1968), however, argues that competition makes a valuable contribution to forensics. He suggests that (1) competition is realistic and unavoidable, (2) competition is a particularly fine source of motivation, and that (3) valuable learning does take place in a tournament situation.

First, competition is realistic and unavoidable. Competitions are powerful learning experiences. Competition is the engine that drives education. Murphy (1999) notes that there are many who fiercely champion the benefits of exposing students to competition as a way of preparing them for life and teaching them valuable skills such as team work and leadership" (p. 138). However, forensics competition is not, nor does it claim to be, a perfect mirror of the real world. Competition builds character and teaches necessary life

skills. Still, students receive a more complete education when they have both competitive and noncompetitive opportunities (Sellnow & Seekins, 1990).

Second, competition is a fine source of motivation. According to Rieke (1968) although "there is something regrettable in the use of extrinsic forms of motivation, no substitute has yet been found that will inspire students half as well" (p. 67). Extrinsic awards do have their allure. In addition, by increasing the motivation to succeed and therefore the desire to improve in the competitive forensic laboratory, students won't have to play the "what if" game that puzzles many former competitors. What if I had tried harder? What if I had rewritten my speech? What if I had competed in impromptu?

Finally, valuable learning does take place in a tournament situation. Students learn how to adjust their performances to the demands of different situations. Students also learn how to adjust to the strains of the competitive environment. Bartanen (1994) suggests that although

> teachers often use debate and public speaking as classroom tools, the educational benefits are not nearly as apparent as the benefits associated with organized competitive forensics. This is because forensics uses more long-term, intensive and sustained practice in debate and speaking skills" (30).

Other benefits can also be noted. Success in competitive environments increases self-esteem, grace under pressure, and may also pay off in educational opportunities.

Although we still believe that education, rather than competition, ought to be the primary focus of forensics. Competition is a necessary and constitutive element of our activity. Our advice, therefore, is that we need to encourage the appropriate competitive orientation in our forensic programs.

Ego Versus Mastery Orientations to Forensic Competition

The verb "to compete" is derived from the Latin word *competere*, meaning "to seek together." However, too often this search can become confused and redirected through the pursuance of problematic competitive goals. In seeking to improve, students can be faced with a choice between Individual Events and other activities, between learning a new event to satisfy their own desire and having to throw together an event to gain team points. Likewise, coaches can get caught up in the desire for their students to be the best, have the newest material, and to have the most well-written speeches, regardless of their own input. Coaches can also be faced with a choice between going to an easy tournament their team can win and going to a difficult tournament that might afford more learning opportunities. Finally, programs can be faced with having to "prove" their worthiness or educational value. How easy and often misguided to point to a state championship as "evidence" of student growth and skill development.

In short, we struggle with the tension between education and competition due largely to our misunderstanding of the competitive process. Whether competition is confidence building or ego deflating depends largely on the attitudinal stance of the student. Murphy (1999) explains that "sports psychology researchers have found that by the time students reach adolescence, they have developed a stable set of attitudes toward competition" (p.138). One of the most important aspects of this attitudinal set is what psychologists commonly refer to as goal orientation, or what we might refer to as competitive orientation. This orientation can also be applied to coaches and programs. For example, competitive orientation explains what Individual Events students focus on while immersed in a tournament setting, how they behave in different competitive

contexts, and what sorts of goals they are likely to establish in competition. According to Murphy (1999) there are two main dimensions of a speech student's competitive orientation. They are known as ego orientation and mastery orientation.

Ego Orientation

The Individual Events student with an ego orientation towards competition is concerned with their overall appearance at a tournament. The most important question that crosses the mind of such students is often, "How do I compare to other competitors at the tournament?" It can be assumed that students with this view want to protect their egos by always appearing to be successful, to be winners. The end result of a tournament is very important to such students and is measured by such competitive yardsticks as trophies, team placement, and individual sweepstakes awards. Students with an ego orientation want to win and do well, because simply, it makes them appear superior. Losing is to be avoided at all costs because it hurts their self-image of being a talented forensics competitor. A student's ego-orientation can be tracked over time. At one time or another every coach has probably had a student who expressed a devil-may-care attitude towards winning until he or she began to do well.

This orientation can also be applied to coaches and programs. A high ego orientation in a coach might be reflected in questions such as "How do my students compare with other students at the tournament?" and "My students should have done better." At the program level, concerns might be illustrated through a focus on questions such as "How high did we place at the tournament?" and a philosophy that that awards "star" students.

Mastery Orientation

The student with a mastery orientation towards competition is driven by the desire to become excellent within the realm of Individual Events. The most important question asked by such a student might be, "How much have I improved my skills?". Murphy (1999) reveals that students who adhere to this approach want to master their activity, to become experts in a sense, or at least, to be as good as they possibly can be. The final results at tournaments are important to these individuals, but only if those results help them determine how much they have improved. Such students will not be satisfied with winning if they were not completely prepared, or they feel they did not live up to their full potential.

Coaches and programs might also reflect a mastery orientation. Coaches who are primarily concerned with promoting student growth and skill development over accumulating team accolades reflect this position. Programs that pay more explicit attention to student growth as opposed to tournament placement also reflect the mastery orientation.

Competitive Orientation

Experts argue that both ego and mastery tendencies exist in all of us. The strength of a student's (or program's) orientation will have significant implications for how the student deals with competitive orientations. The orientations outlined by Murphy (1999) are as follows:

> **High Ego, High Mastery:** Desires to win, compares self to others, wants to improve, can take risks, usually confident, high achiever.
>
> **High Ego, Low Mastery:** Driven to win, compares self to others, lacks confidence, doesn't take risks, external causes for success.

Low Ego, High Mastery: Self-motivated, persistent learner, desire to improve, internal causes for success (effort), takes risks, consistent confidence.

Low Ego, Low Mastery: Not goal-oriented, no risks, doesn't care about comparisons to others.

This system is useful for understanding how students fit with program philosophies and how best to motivate particular students. Unfortunately, many students and programs are guided by an ego approach. The first question asked after a final round is "Did you win?" It seems more productive, however, to develop a mastery perspective towards forensics competition. A mastery perspective allows the student competitor to accept failures and learn from them, to focus on improvement and not just on winning. The differences in ego and mastery perspectives can be seen in differences in approaches to competition based upon the orientation adopted. These questions are taken from Murphy (1999) in his book, The Cheers and the Tears (p. 145).

High Ego	**High Mastery**
1. Only winners profit. Losers get nothing.	There are multiple paths to victory. Losing brings development.
2. The value of competition lies in the prize to be won.	The value of competition is personal Development and long-term success.
3. Happiness comes from winning.	Happiness comes from being good at what you love.
4. Sportsmanship is peripheral to competition. Cheating is OK if you can get away with it.	Sportsmanship is part of the essence of competition. Cheating robs you of success.
5. If you win the prize, nothing is left for the losers.	Your success creates more opportunities for others.

6. Far your opponents, for they might beat you. If you win, they lose.	Strong opponents bring greater achievement on your part. Your strength pushes others to excel.
7. Practice is useful if it makes you look good. Otherwise, avoid it.	Practice provides the opportunity to become good at something you enjoy.

Although an ego orientation can be highly productive, it is unstable if not balanced by some degree of mastery orientation. A program guided by an ego perspective can produce a highly troubled team culture and convince students that trophies are the measure of success and that unethical behavior is warranted so long as it produces results.

Promoting the Acceptance and Accomplishment of Competitive Goals

In an effort to promote the mastery orientation of forensics, for programs both large and small, we suggest the following practical steps to ensure that competition and education are able to work in tandem, as opposed to causing undo strain on coaches, students and administrators.

First, if our ultimate goal is to master the art of forensics, then it is our responsibility to teach students all the rules and ethical codes that govern speech activities. As Bartanen (1994) explained, "High ethical standards are important. Clear program guidelines on ethics are essential to encouraging ethical behavior" (p. 81). If a student wants to excel, then he/she must know the parameters in which they can successfully maneuver. Too often we make the assumption that our students know all the policies, procedures and rules. But we must not forget that each year brings a whole new crop of young recruits that, although eager to be successful, do not necessarily know the how to do so in the collegiate arena. We can't assume that older students will relay this information. It is our job to go over all rules each year. One of the primary philosophical

approaches to forensics education is to view forensics as a competitive activity. This perspective considers the activity from a rule based paradigm, emphasizes creating a level playing field of competition for the participants. Taking a strict approach to the teaching of rules and then adhering to those rules will help to set a domain in which students can achieve mastery.

Second, it is our responsibility as forensic educators to articulate universal goals rather than short-term goals. The teacher ought to set out a clear educational philosophy for students emphasizing the long-term benefits of individual events competition. This involves the explanation of process issues (Bartanen, 1994, p. 79). Long-term goals are important to a perspective that stresses mastery. Too often coaching sessions focus on output as opposed to process and personal growth. For example, any time a coach asks a student to "throw an event together" so that a student can enter pentathlon, or so that the team entry can be fleshed out to bolster team placement, the student is forced to view forensics from a competitive as opposed to an educational lens. The goal of competition in this instance is not to teach, but to win despite preparation.

Third, introduce competition gradually. Don't travel an extremely competitive schedule. There is nothing wrong with traveling to easier tournaments so that students can have a positive competitive experience. Winning can be educational. Some students need to have time to master skills before engaging is difficult competition.

Fourth, don't be afraid to let students fail. Students need to get their hands dirty by engaging in the "invention process, even if they occasionally fail. However, lessons need to be learned from the failure so that the student does not become frustrated. (Bartanen, 1994, 78-79). Again, this promotes a mastery perspective to student learning.

True learning occurs when students are forced to consider how they go about event preparation. In a sense, after a loss, students are forced to tear down preconceived notions about an event and reconstruct their knowledge base in an effort to become better. Failure fosters education.

Fifth, don't just focus on stars, but instead focus on the development of the team as a whole. Too often we as coaches invest all of our energies in our most talented students at the expense of other squad members. Unfortunately, this method focuses on output rather than process. We must remember that stars eventually graduate and that when they do what we will be ultimately left with is a core group of students left with little training or confidence to step up and assert themselves as competitors.

Sixth, develop a communication culture where education and competition are equal. There are educational goals to competition, but these goals must be fostered in an educational environment. Students need to know what they are expected to learn from competition. They need to know that failure in the short-term is okay so long a long-term development is constantly being nurtured.

Finally, on a programmatic level, understand that the long-term health of a program, especially if it must endure several coaching changes, is rarely served by an ego orientation. The mastery perspective does a much better job of ensuring program stability. Ego orientations can be stoked in an environment which ensures the ability to take risks and occasionally fail.

Conclusion

Competition is not by its very nature either good or bad. Rather, it is our approach to competition that exerts the greatest influence. The ways in which we go about

competition can produce experiences for our students that are either wonderfully confidence-building or miserably ego-deflating. In this essay we have examined the role of competition in forensics, contrasted the ego and mastery approaches to competition, and suggested possible steps that programs can be taken to promote the acceptance and accomplishment of competitive goals. The centrality of competition to Individual Events should not be denigrated. Rather, it should be seized upon as an opportunity to discuss how and why we do what we do.

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